

# THE BLESSING

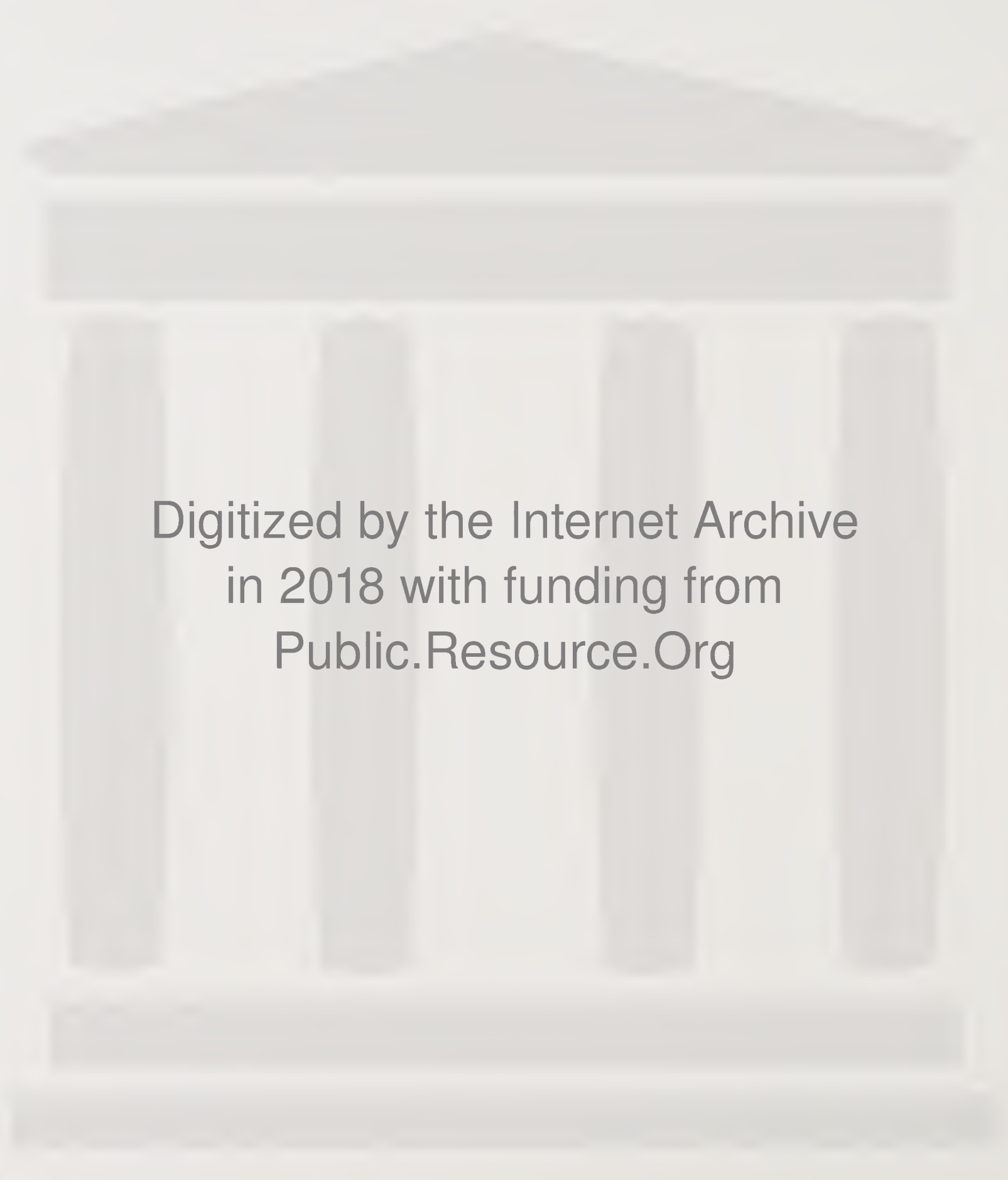
*& Other Stories*

SWATI BHATTACHARJEE



PUBLICATIONS DIVISION





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# THE BLESSING AND OTHER STORIES

SWATI BHATTACHARJEE



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Swati Bhattacharjee, author of ten books is better known as a writer of children's fiction. Being a journalist and that too a reporter par excellence, she is a keen observer of her surroundings and has got a penchant for details.

She won an Award in the annual competition for Children's Fiction held by Children's Book Trust in the year 2000.

Swati employs allegorical styles and uses poetic sensibility in her stories which invest the simple narratives with different layers of meanings. This extends the horizon of her stories and as a result even the adults find them highly enjoyable. She delineates the pathos of life and the twists of circumstances in some of her stories with a touch of realism.

Sometimes the stories convey messages without being unnecessarily pedantic. Even a casual reader can discern this blending of story-telling with an undercurrent of moral instructions and a thread of deep sense of humanity running through the stories.

Her style is simple, racy and lucid with an unmatched economy of words.



## INTRODUCTION

A new story is a sapling in the forest of stories. There are the big, ancient stories, loved and nurtured for many, many years. There are stories so tall, one could climb all life, stories so wide one could sleep in them, stories so beautiful that one never stopped wondering at them. Children discover this treasure trove early, and keep coming back to it all through life. Indeed many never leave the forest of stories.

The children's appetite for stories is eternal. In India we have an age-old tradition of story telling, lullaby of grandmother, creating a world of fantasy. It generates *inter-alia* a capacity for empathy in children and a yearning for a new world.

One writer aptly put it:

'One does not write 'for' children. One writes so that children can understand.' Which means, writing as clearly, vividly and truthfully as possible.

In a way that is the ultimate test for the success of the children's stories.

This collection of eight stories presents a variety of fares for a hearty smile, a silent pause, deep introspection and overall enjoyment. In a world of cut-throat competition, strife and tribulations, the children still harbour secret chambers in their minds for a sense of wonder and sensibility. They have their own way of seeing the world around.

Each of the eight stories tells a different tale, but perhaps they have one thing in common - a sense that great mysteries - strange powers, deep wisdom - live within each of us. Sometimes we feel them in ourselves and at times in people we know. They might remind us that there is no such thing as 'ordinary people.' Each one of us is extraordinary. Every life is magical. These stories are, I hope, little prisms that would set off the true colours hidden in the light of life.

I hope the children will like the stories in the volume. At least, part of their splendid vision might not 'fade into the light of common day.'

Last but not the least, I find no words to express my gratitude to the Publications Division, Government of India for bringing out the volume in an attractive format.

Swati Bhattacharjee

For Baba





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# THE FIRST ARTIST

His brother came running, panting hard, “A Big Horned One! In the trap” he shouted. Men and women swarmed out of the caves. Children climbed down trees. Babies stopped whimpering and stared.

They all rushed to the place behind the Big Stone where they kept their colts, hammers, hand axes. They had spent hours hitting big stones with small ones, shaping them, sharpening their edges. With stone tools in hand, men no longer needed to hide in caves like rabbits, like foxes. They could bring to ground the Horned Ones and the Clawed Ones far more powerful than they were.

Stones, and traps. Traps made of sturdy climbers, which lay so innocently among the forest undergrowth but suddenly caught a foraging beast. Then men and women ran forward with their stone tools, ululating in joy. Together they hounded and killed the beast and carried it to their caves.

The Boy saw them shouting and running. His brother was leading everyone - he had found the beast. His mother and younger sisters were also in the pack of hunters. His father would have gone too, if he had not been trampled to death by the Big Ones with Tusks and Trunks some days ago.

Everyone had disappeared down the hill, the dust had settled. Slowly without making a sound, the boy stepped forward.

“Where are you going?”

His grandmother stood at the mouth of the cave. In one hand, she held a sharp flake of stone, and in the other, a blood covered skin. She was cleaning the skin, scraping away the flesh from the hide with the tool.

The Boy pointed at the dark green forest at the foot of the hills. His grandmother pointed at his leg. Many full-moons ago, when the Boy was a baby, his mother had once fallen asleep at the mouth of the cave with him in her lap. No one should ever do that - women always slept in the innermost part of the cave - but Mother was tired and the day had been long. When she

was woken by the screaming of her baby, a huge dark animal was pulling away her child. Mother made such a noise that everyone came running and the beast ran away. But the boy's leg had deep wounds.

The Boy had only one good leg. He limped badly. He was not allowed to hunt. Animals had a way of knowing who was the weakest among hunters and they were sure to attack him, or her. The Boy had to stay at the cave with the old ones, guarding the fire, scrapping hides, making stone tools. His tools were sharper and lighter, so they were valued a lot by the hunters. But they never took him with them to hunt.

What they did not know was that the Boy often followed them stealthily. At the edge of the forest, he would climb up a tree, then move from one tree to another, guided by the sound of their voices. Hidden behind the leaves, he would watch the enraged, bleeding animal fight the hunters. He felt its rage, its fear, in his heart. And he felt the excitement, the mad joy of the hunters too. One moment he was the trembling beast, next moment the stone-throwing, ululating men. He died with the beast and rejoiced with the hunters.

The Grandmother knew this. But she was worried about him. There were dangers in the trees, too. "No", she told him. "Don't go, stay". But the Boy was already climbing a rock.

The old woman, as a last attempt, pointed at the pile of soft rocks which crumbled easily. The Boy loved to play with them, marveling at the colours they gave out when they crumbled. But he was in no mood to play. Even with his bad leg, he moved fast, clambering down the rocks like a lizard.

And that day, he saw a hunt the like of which he had never seen before. The beast was huge, its horns thick and pointed. Foam flew from his mouth. He lashed out with his tail and struck with his hooves. As the men started throwing stones, his bellows matched the cries of the hunters.

Twice it seemed as if he would break the trap of creepers and mow down the men. The fight continued for hours. Thinking the beast must have got a little tired, two young men, the bravest among the pack, dashed up to it. They wanted to grip its horns and force its head down, so that others could close in upon it and hit it hard, driving the sharp stone weapons into its flesh. But before anyone could raise an arm, the beast had tossed both men into the air with one movement of its neck. Then it beat them with its horns and hoofs.

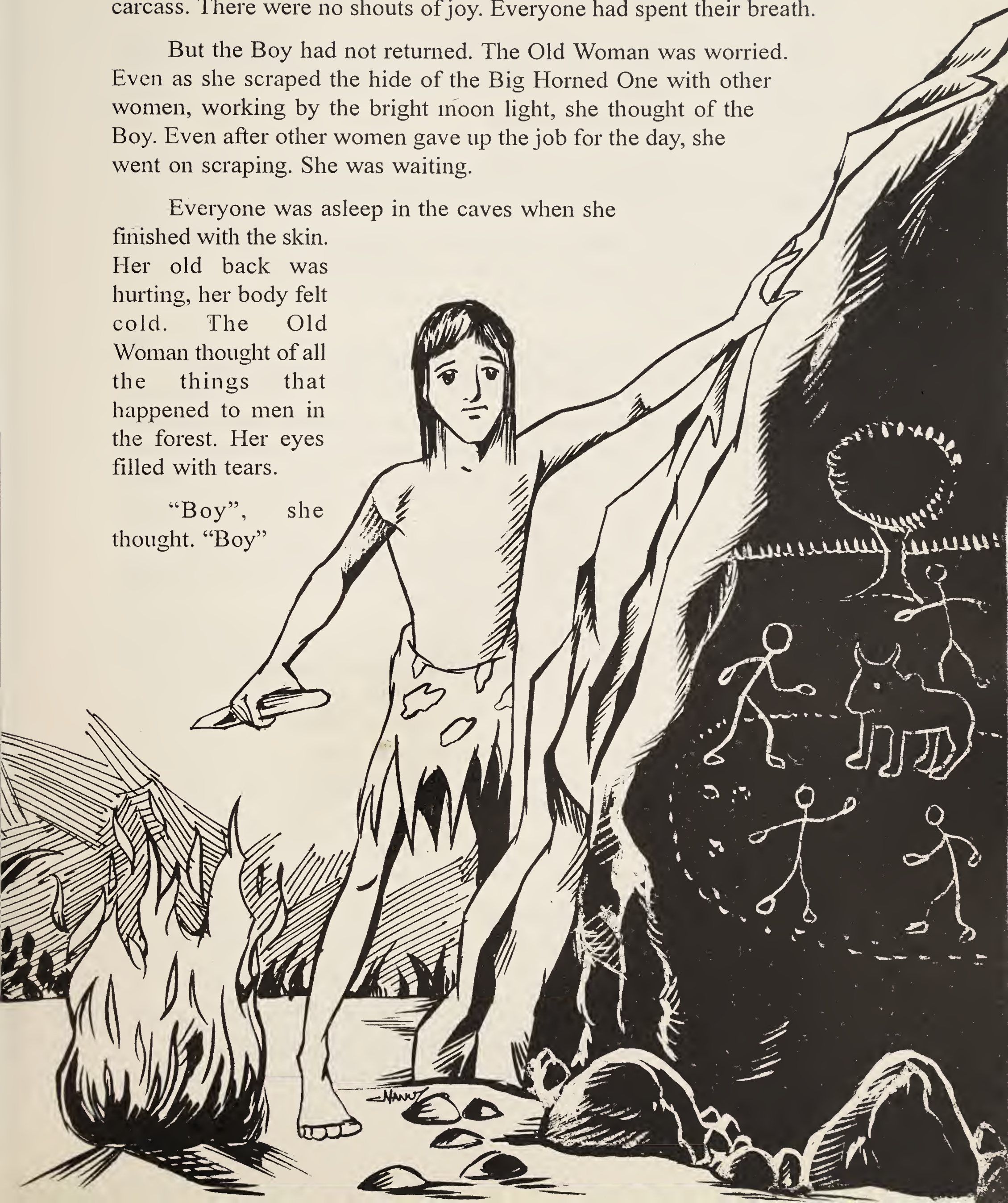


The sun was turning red when the hunters returned with the carcass. There were no shouts of joy. Everyone had spent their breath.

But the Boy had not returned. The Old Woman was worried. Even as she scraped the hide of the Big Horned One with other women, working by the bright moon light, she thought of the Boy. Even after other women gave up the job for the day, she went on scraping. She was waiting.

Everyone was asleep in the caves when she finished with the skin. Her old back was hurting, her body felt cold. The Old Woman thought of all the things that happened to men in the forest. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Boy", she thought. "Boy"





Suddenly, through her tears, she saw a flicker of light. Of fire. Up in the hills.

She could not believe her eyes. Those caves were abandoned days ago. Too narrow. Too dark. Who could have lit a fire there?

Suddenly, she knew the answer.

Forcing her tired bones to move, she climbed up the hill. Slowly, painfully, she climbed till she reached the mouth of the cave.

A torch burnt in a corner, throwing a trembling light on the opposite wall. The Boy stood before the wall, busy doing something.

What was he doing?

The Old woman made a sound. The Boy jumped and stood aside. The Grandmother gasped when she saw what was on the wall behind him.

There was the Great Horned One, charging with fury. Men—stick-like, but distinctly men—crowded around, weapons in hand. The wall had become the forest, the crumbling stones that yielded colours had turned into beasts and men. Seeing them, the Old Woman felt the rhythm of the hunt within her veins. She remembered the time when she was young, when she would throw stones on bleeding, bellowing beasts... In the shaking light of the fire, the old woman and the young boy stood before the wall.

They did not know what it was that the Boy had created. They had no words for it. Centuries later, their descendants would call it **Art**.



## Vishnu

“Wake up, Arjun, you lazy boy” mother said. “The sun is over the Jamun tree, and you are still sleeping!”. Arjun sat up and rubbed his eyes with his little fists. Like petals laden with dew, his eye-lids were too full of sleep to open up to the day.

“What will you do tomorrow? Masterji will beat you up if you are late for school”

Now Arjun was wide awake. Yes, he was starting school from tomorrow. Like his brothers, he too would have to get up at the crack of dawn, gobble up a few cold rotis with hot milk and run for school. He would not be at home to watch the gold of the morning sun turn into the white heat of the afternoon, or watch the squirrels run about, or the birds searching for worms.

And, thought Arjun as he finished his milk, he would not be able to play. He would not be able to run round the huts, play hide and seek among the trees by the cool, green, village pond or race with his friends to see who could first touch the pole someone had planted long ago in the field where the cows grazed. No, he would be sitting on hard wooden benches, the window behind him. And he would return tired and sweating like his brothers who shouted at Arjun if he asked them to play.

Suddenly, Arjun could not sit still, “I must play today, yes. I must!” he thought. Swiftly, before mother could ask him where he was going, he was out. He ran to his friend’s house and called “Biltu, Hei, Biltu”.

Biltu’s sister answered, “He has gone to the market with Baba.” So Arjun ran a little further and called out, “Raju! Hei, Raju!”

Raju’s grandma came out, “Oh, another one of the gang eh? How can your mother let you out in this sun, you monkey...”

Arjun flew from there. Back home, he pleaded with Shyamkaka: “Please Kaka, only one game! Just one!”

But Shyamkaka was cross, “I have all this straw to chop for the cows, and then I must clean up the shed. Go, play by yourself.”



“Ma, play with me, just a little,” begged Arjun.

But mother wasn’t even listening. She was scolding the old, deaf maid for not cleaning the fish properly.

“Didi, come and play hide and seek.”

“Don’t be silly,” hissed his sister; and turned up her radio.

No one wanted to play with Arjun. Not Nemaiddada, who worked in their fields, not Lakshmididi, not Shibumama, who came to deliver letters.

His head bent with unhappiness, Arjun wandered to the open field where the cows were grazing; “how much place there is to play on earth, thought little Arjun, to whom the earth ended with the trees on the horizon. “But no one wants to play.”



“Do you want to play?”

Arjun jumped. Turning around, he found a dark young boy smiling at him. His body was bare, he wore only a pair of torn yellow shorts. Arjun had never seen him before, but who cared? He shouted, “YES!”

And how they played! They chased each other all over the field. They hid from each other and sought each other out. They climbed trees, swung from the roots hanging from the branches, made a fort of clay and dust and played-acted as soldiers. Now they were a bear and a hunter; now Rama and Ravana, now a horse and a motor-car racing each other. Then they cooked a lunch of wild berries and leaves and choked with laughter as they served each other.

Afterwards, they sat side by side, Arjun’s legs were aching, but his heart was full. “I’m so happy,” he laughed. “I’ve never played like today.”

The boy smiled and said, “Yes, but you were sad before.”

“That’s because no one would play with me,” said Arjun.

“Once people grow up, no one makes them play.”

“I can...” said the boy munching a juicy grass stalk.

“You?” laughed Arjun. “They don’t even know you.”

“I can make anybody play. Want to see?”

The boy held Arjun’s hand, and took him to the big *ashwath* tree. They climbed up and sat on a big, broad branch. Then the boy took out a flute from his pocket and started playing.

Arjun felt he knew the tune, yet it was unlike any song he had heard. Soon his head was nodding, his hands clapped, his feet tapped the branch—as if on their own—to the rhythm of the music. Little Arjun was listening so deeply that when the tiny ‘figures’ appeared on the edge of the huge field, he hardly noticed them. But more came, and more, and more—all streaming towards them. Arjun’s eyes opened wider and wider. Why, he knew them all! There, that was the night watchman, that one the shopkeeper, who sold kerosene and firewood and that woman—wasn’t she the one who made dresses and blouses? That man was Nemaiddada, over there, hand in hand with the man who repaired thatch roofs. Even the *mukhia*, an old man with a big, dirty white moustache, was there!

When the field was looking like a *mela* ground, the boy suddenly changed his tune, playing faster and faster. The notes rose and fell like waves, twirling, turning, sweeping everyone, everything. And saw Arjun, everyone had started playing!

The men kicked a ball—a big lemon, one of them had found—and ran around, jostling each other and shouting. Arjun could see his uncles, his neighbours, and even his father among them. Some older men played *danda goli*. How the *mukhia* drew up his *dhoti* over his knee and brought down the *danda*: whack! Boys and girls, still in school dress, chanted “*Kabadi, kabadi, kabadi*” and chased each other. Little children screeched and ran around the elders.

And then there were the women. They laughed and sang and played—as if they had no kitchen, no home, no children. They drew patterns on the ground and hopped from one square to another without touching the lines. One woman cleared all the squares and laughed loudly, throwing her arms wide. It was her mother, saw Arjun.

Eyes round with wonder, Arjun looked at his friend. The boy’s eyes sparkled with laughter.

For a long time, the villagers played. Then the music changed—the flute was playing a slower, softer tune. People started leaving one by one. Some were holding hands, others still hopping a little as they went. Soon the field was empty.

Arjun whispered, “Who are you?”

“Vishnu,” smiled his friend.

“Will you play with me again?”

“Yes, whenever you want to play”

“I’ll come tomorrow,” said Arjun. He threw his hands around Vishnu and kissed him. Then he ran home.

The next day, Arjun started school. Never again did he find time to play under the morning sun, without a care in the world. As he grew older, he would often stand beside the field and try to remember what had happened there. He would not remember but in his heart he would know it was something wonderful.



# Why Shibu Ran Away

Bubul shut the geometry box with a sigh-The eraser was not there.

Pencils and erasers, rulers and compasses were pretty lifeless in shops. But once they entered Bubul's pencil box, they turned into naughty back-benchers. They were always jumping out of the school-bag, rolling off and hiding in the darkest corners. And it was always in the mornings, when the school bus was honking for Bubul, four dogs were barking at the bus and Mummy was shouting at everyone, that they tried their tricks.

Thank God the bus was a little late that day. Bubul shoved his books and copies inside the bag and ran downstairs. He burst into the garage on the ground floor and shouted, "Shibu? Hei Shibu!"

"What is it?" said a voice from behind a battered Ambassador. All that could be seen of the owner of the voice were two large, calloused feet, the soles black with grime and Mobil.

"Where is my eraser?"

There was a silence of about 45 seconds. Then came the reply, "It has rolled off into the bathroom. Look behind the doors"

A minute later, Bubul was wiping the wet eraser on the bed cover. "What would I do without Shibu!" he thought.

Shibu had come to work in the garage six months ago. Soon he was a part of the group of Bubul's friends, 10 and 12 years olds who played cricket all year and badminton on winter evenings. At first, they had all laughed at the way this boy from an unknown village bowled—as if his hands and feet wanted to move in four different directions. But how he ran! He could outrun any ball. "There goes Jonty Rhodes," they teased, but Shibu only laughed.

Then one day, Bubul could not find a costly watch—the one Vikram uncle had got him from Singapore. He was so worried that he could hardly play in the evening. After the game, Shibu had come over to him. "It is in the drawer, look beneath the clothes," he had whispered.



Sure enough, the watch was there. Since then, Bubul would run to Shibu every other day. "Where did I throw the tie?" "Where's my atlas?" "Where's the red deuce ball?" And Shibu was right every time. "If Mom knew how many times I have lost pencils and erasers in the last week, she would be mad," thought Bubul. "I'll never tell them about Shibu."



Yet that very evening, Bubul gave away his secret. When he returned from school that day, Bubul found the whole house was topsy turvy. The mattresses were on the floor, corners of the carpets turned up, books scattered everywhere. Mother was frantically opening and shutting the drawers of every table and cupboard. “She can’t find her gold chain,” whispered Radhadidi to Bubul as she dragged out balls of hair, and forgotten bill with her *jhadu* from beneath the bed. For half an hour, Bubul watched the mad drama. But when Mummy started sobbing, Bubul could not take it any more. He ran downstairs to Shibu.

Shibu turned away, as he always did, for a few seconds before replying, “It’s in the attic. The dogs took it up there,” he said.

Then Bubul made the first mistake. “Come with me,” he said. Together, they went up to the attic. The chain was lying on the dusty floor, Bubul ran down, Shibu on his heels.

“Mummy, here it is!”

He had thought Mom would laugh. That she would hug him and turn to others and say, “See these kids are smarter than all of you.”

But Mom was not smiling. Her eyes looked hard. “Who found it?” she said, looking from one boy to the other.

“Where was it?”

“It... it was in the attic”

“How did you know it was there?” Papa spoke now. In an ice-cold voice.

Then Bubul, a very confused, very scared Bubul, made the second mistake. He pointed at Shibu. “He told me,” he said.

Half an hour later, Shibu was lying on the street downstairs, being beaten mercilessly. Mother was speaking to other flat owners. “Can you imagine? He hid the chain himself and then told my son where to find it.”

“Who knows how many things he has stolen in the last few months?” said Mrs. Roy. “He is always running up and down the steps with our boys. He must have kept a watch on our flats all the while.”

“Of course. My son says, Shibu had told him where to find lost pencils and erasers. Mummy was saying. “How could he know?”



The boy who ran like Jonty Rhodes could barely walk now. He was being dragged to the police station. Bubul followed the little group. Mother shouted at him but he didn't look back. There was only one thought in his head.

How could Shibu know?

To Bubul, Shibu's gift was just that. A gift. Some boys could bowl a googly. Some could get every sum right. Shibu could tell where to find a lost thing. It had never seemed strange to Bubul. But now he wondered. How could Shibu do it?

At the police station, Bubul's father wrote a complaint. The inspector roared at Shibu. "Have you stolen anything before?"

"I have never stolen anything," Shibu wheezed through his puffed up lips.

"How did you know where to find the chain?"

"I just knew it."

The next moment, Shibu was on the floor. Like a flash of lightening, the inspector had sprung up and hit Shibu across his cheek. Bubul closed his eyes. He was too scared even to cry.

After another severe beating, Shibu was bound to a pillar in the *thana*. "He is a seasoned criminal," announced the inspector, panting a little. "He did not cry out even once."

More questions followed. Not once did Shibu say he had stolen the chain. "I just knew," he repeated.

"Shibu could tell my son where to find lost things," Papa said with a smile. A smile which said, "Of course I don't believe it."

"Really?" the inspector looked at Shibu. "I lost my wallet last week. Can you tell me where it is?"

Shibu was silent. His bleeding lips were shut. He would not speak.

"Take him to the lock-up," said the inspector.

Suddenly, Bubul could not take it any more. He ran to the pillar, tears streaming from his eyes. "Tell him Shibu," he wept, shaking Shibu's bruised shoulders. "Tell him, tell him."

Shibu looked at Bubul. He smiled a faint smile. Then he closed his eyes.

Suddenly, there was silence. It was as if the busy police station was holding its breath.

And then, a gasp went up. A collective sound of utter disbelief.

Shibu's eyes were closed. But in the middle of his forehead, a third eye had opened, staring directly at them.

Breath stopped.

Thought stopped.

Time stopped.

Till Shibu spoke again.

"It's beneath your mother's bed," he said. Like a ripple vanishing in water the third eye was gone.

Bubul acted first. He unbound Shibu. Shibu stepped forward.

A woman screamed. Someone fainted. "My lord! Jai Shiva!" The constable standing on guard at the door threw away his gun and flung himself at Shibu's feet. Then every one, men and women, criminals and policemen, richmen poormen, together surged ahead and fell at Shibu's feet.

With one big leap, Shibu freed himself from the hands clutching his feet. In a flash, he was over the prostrate bodies. Then he was out.

Bubul saw him running away. Jumping to the back of a speeding truck.

Disappearing.

That was the last Bubul saw of Shibu.



# The Treasure of the Blind Witch

When Ziddi reached the edge of the forest, it was getting dark.

No one in Ziddi's village would dream of entering the forest at night. Even during the day, only a few woodcutters dared to go into it. For it was an endless, vast jungle, full of dancing shadows.

But into this strange forest Ziddi went, that too on a moonless night. He wanted to meet the Blind Witch.

The Blind Witch, said village elders, guarded a treasure that even kids could not dream of. But she would give it only to the man who would go into the jungle on a moonless night, find her out and do what she told him to do.



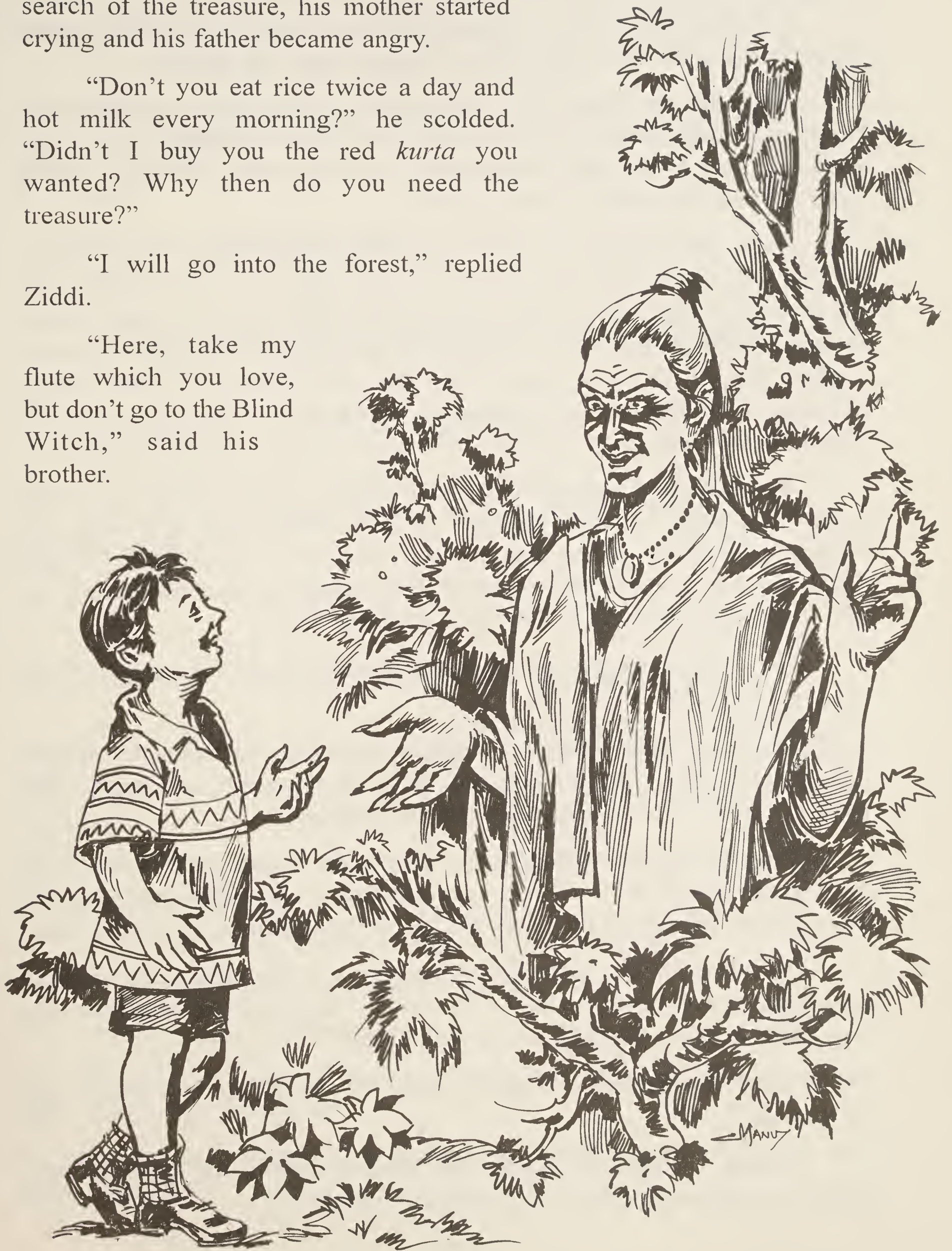


When Ziddi said he wanted to go in search of the treasure, his mother started crying and his father became angry.

“Don’t you eat rice twice a day and hot milk every morning?” he scolded. “Didn’t I buy you the red *kurta* you wanted? Why then do you need the treasure?”

“I will go into the forest,” replied Ziddi.

“Here, take my flute which you love, but don’t go to the Blind Witch,” said his brother.





“I will go into the forest,” said Ziddi.

Even the village *mukhia* begged Ziddi not to go. “Those who look the Blind Witch in the face either die or become mad,” he warned.

But Ziddi would not listen. So now he stood at the edge of the great forest that looked even more terrifying as night descended upon it. To Ziddi, the forest was like a huge dark, crouching beast, waiting to spring upon anyone who dared to stray near it.

When Ziddi reached the hut of the Blind Witch, dawn was breaking. He had spent the longest, the most fearsome night of his life walking into the bowels of the forest. Slimy things had walked over his feet, strange creatures had breathed on his cheeks, his neck. Once he thought he heard a whisper, then a whine. But apart from the slush of mud and rotten leaves sticking to his feet and the numerous scratches from the thorn of *bubla* plants, he was unharmed. He had arrived, alive, to face the Blind Witch.

How calm and peaceful the Witch looked ! Ziddi thought she would be an ugly, angry woman, talking in a high, sharp voice. But when she spoke – even before he had spoken – her voice was low and sweet. “So you didn’t listen to your people?” she said. “Do you know, no one in your home has eaten since yesterday? They will fast today also.”

Ziddi did not answer her. Instead, he said, “I want the treasure. What do you want me to do?”

The Witch sighed. She was washing some rice. Her long, thin fingers did not let a single grain escape from the bowl along with the water. “You are but a child. What will you do with the treasure?”

“I can bring you the skin of the black cobra,” said Ziddi. “I can climb the highest tree to get vulture’s eggs for you. I can kill a crocodile and bring you its left eye, or the wing of a bat, or the hind leg of the ‘kola’ toad.

The Blind Witch laughed. Her laughter was like clear water rippling over loose stones. “Do you think I eat toad’s – leg curry and vulture’s –egg omelettes? Is that what they say in the village?”

“I want the treasure!” shouted Ziddi, “I come all the way and all you do is laugh!”

“Laugh!” echoed the Witch; and laughed some more, her white hair shaking, her face breaking into a thousand wrinkles.

Now Ziddi was furious. He stamped his feet and shook his fists. Slowly, the Witch became quiet. Her blind eyes were level with Ziddi's; he had an uneasy feeling that she could see him.

"What I want you to do, Ziddi, is to laugh"

"Laugh?" Ziddi could not believe his ears. "To get the treasure, all I must do is laugh?"

"Yes"

"Are you making fun of me?"

"No"

"Will you give me chests of rubies and emeralds if I laugh?"

"Yes," said the Witch.

"But diamonds? What about diamonds?"

"Diamonds too, if you want"

"And money? Will you give me enough money to build a house larger than the *mukhia's*?"

"You can have as much money as you want"

"Then here goes..."

Ziddi took a deep breath, and let out an immense laugh.

"Ha, ha ha," he went, his mouth wide open, his throat swelling up with the effort of pushing out so mighty a sound. Birds sprang up from trees, rabbits scurried to their holes, and a tiny monkey cub that was just learning to climb fell to the ground from the branches.

At last Ziddi stopped. Sweat was running off his brow. The Witch sat unmoved, her blind eyes unblinking.

"Well? How was that for a laugh?" said Ziddi, panting.

"It was not a laugh," replied the Witch.

"What?" cried Ziddi, now hoarse.

"You did not laugh at all," said the Witch. "You only made a sound like a laugh, like the hyena".

Ziddi opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again. The Witch was right, after all.



“I must think of something funny so I can really laugh,” thought Ziddi.

He sat down under a tree and thought hard. He remembered the time a magician had come to their village. After showing some tricks, he had asked for a 50 rupee note. Gangadhar, a rich farmer but a miser, proudly held up one—the only 50 rupee note in the village. The magician took it and, smiling, tore it up. How Gangadhar raved and cursed! The more he shouted, the more the magician smiled. At last, when Gangadhar was about to beat him, the magician pulled out the note from behind Gangadhar’s ears. How sheepish the man looked! Ziddi and his friends had laughed and laughed at the sight of his face. Now too, Ziddi started laughing – a good, hearty laugh. He ran to the witch and stood in front of her laughing.

“That’s mockery!” cried the Witch. “That’s not a laugh”

Again Ziddi sat and thought. This time, he remembered how the children of the village tied *phuljharis* on the tails of the dogs on Diwali. How the dogs ran! How funny the *phuljharis* looked—dashing lights in the dark. Ziddi stood before the Witch and laughed, the frightened animals running before his mind’s eyes.

“You call that a laugh? I hear only the sound of cruelty!” scolded the Witch. And again, when Ziddi showed her how he had laughed when he had won ‘over all his friends’ marbles, she shook her head, “That is pride, not a true laugh”

All day long, the Blind Witch had to listen to Ziddi’s laughs. After the thirty-third laugh, she took to only shaking her head, and after the fifty-seventh laugh, she chased Ziddi with her stick. “You who bray like a donkey and hoot like an owl, come back only when you learn to laugh!”

And so Ziddi wandered in the forest, in search of laughter. He thought of all the smiles and laughs he had known—his mother’s sweet smile when she talked to her old friends, his father’s roar of laughter when he heard a joke, his brother’s squeal of joy when he caught a fish. Which was a real laugh?

Ziddi also watched the animals and the birds. When the crow flapped its wings and said ‘caw-caw’ to other crows, was he laughing? Did the sparrow laugh when she bathed in a pit full of dust? Were the bees humming or laughing? Did the deer laugh when they went down together to drink water? Did the tiger laugh when it roared after catching a deer?

Day after day, Ziddi fell asleep thinking of laughter. All night, he dreamt of various laughs. Often, he would be so lost in the thought of laughter that he forgot to eat the few fruits and roots that had become his food.

Then one day, when Ziddi had started thinking he would never find laughter, laughter came to him.

It happened one morning. Just as Ziddi dipped his cupped hands into a stream to lift water to wash his face, the stream gurgled with laughter.

Surprised, he looked up. Why, even the trees were laughing with a merry, rasping sound. Ziddi looked further up—the sky smiled down; he looked down, the grass was giggling.

And now Ziddi felt laughter rising from deep within him. He lifted his face and laughed—it was a laugh he had never laughed before. It mingled with the laughter of the trees and grass, the stream and the sky, and together they all laughed.

Suddenly, Ziddi heard another voice, another laughter—a sound like water running over loose stones. He turned around and, sure enough, the Blind Witch was standing there. Ziddi ran to her and she clasped him in her thin arms. Ziddi's cheek rested on her chest, and he could hear the sound of laughter rising from inside her.

At last, the Witch let him go. “So how many kilos of diamonds would you like, Maharaj Ziddi?” the Witch smiled.

Ziddi stared, open-mouthed. So deeply had he thought of laughter that he had forgotten all about the treasure! Now, once again, he remembered the diamonds, rubies, emeralds, all his for the asking!

Ziddi sat and thought. The rustling leaves whispered to him, the stream babbled like a child by his side. At last, he looked at the Witch. “What will I do with the treasure?” he asked.

“I don't know. You didn't tell me, remember?”

“Why don't you use the treasure yourself, Witch Mother?”

“What for?” said the Witch, and laughed. “Don't I have the best treasure of all?”

“What is it?” asked Ziddi.

“Don't you know? Can't you see what it is, even when you have got it?” Saying these words, the Witch shuffled to where Ziddi was sitting, and kissed his forehead.



Suddenly, Ziddi knew. Why, it was laughter! What can be so pure, so joyous, so abundant as laughter? What use would be gold coins and silver dishes to him? They could not make him laugh! He'd only have to listen to the trees, the water, the sky...

The Witch laughed as she waved him goodbye. Ziddi laughed back, and ran through the forest. He ran all day and it was nearly dark when he came upon his village.

Everyone rushed to him. They could hardly believe their eyes. "We thought you would never return!" they cried.

"Have you got the treasure?"

"Oh, yes, I've got it," laughed Ziddi.

"Where is it? Did you bury it somewhere?"

"Oh, no!"

"Did you hide it in a crack in a tree trunk, then?"

"No, no."

"Then, where is it? Where is the treasure of the Blind Witch?"

"I have it right here, with me. Can't you see?" laughed Ziddi.

As he stood there, laughing, the villagers stared at him. For seven long minutes, they stared. Then a man shouted, "He's mad! He looked the Blind Witch in the face, and he has become mad!"

"No, I'm not," Ziddi shouted back. "Listen to me..."

But there was no one to listen to him. All the people, his brother among them, had run away.

## Rini Meets A Witch



It was drizzling—a fine, cold rain that left the stones of the Mall slippery. Rini's parents were chatting away happily with the Boses,



the Chatterjees and the Duttas—the Calcutta friends they had met in Darjeeling. Rini sat all by herself on a bench. Her raincoat was two sizes too big. “It will cover up your legs,” mother had said brightly.

Her friends’ mothers scoured the magazines for the latest designs for teenagers. But Rini’s mother would happily buy Rini the most outdated dresses. Together, her parents bought Rini sturdy, unfashionable shoes, forced her to take music lessons. And for summer vacation, they could only think of Darjeeling.

Rini got up and started walking. The raincoat flapped around her like a tent. Parts of her were sweaty inside the rubbery cloth, while her face and hands were freezing. At that moment, barely two weeks after she had turned 13, Rini did not care whether she lived or died.

The road around the Mall was usually busy with trotting horses and noisy tourists. Rini found it deserted. She leaned upon the iron railing, her mind as blank as the fog screen before her eyes.

“I knew you would come.”

Rini jumped and turned around. Her first impression of the speaker was not that of a face or a body, but of extreme beauty and richness. The tall figure, the straight posture, the way the woman held her head, all spoke of a lifetime of living in wealth, in command of a thousand servants. A lovely smell wafted from her.

“Are you m-my mother’s friend?” Rini stammered a little.

“No. I don’t have friends”

“Like me,” thought Rini

“Yes, like you.”

Rini stared at the woman, open mouthed. But she was looking straight ahead into the fog. As if she could see the mountains behind it, just as she could hear unspoken thoughts.

What did one feel when one was about to unwrap a gift? Or, when one sat in a dark auditorium waiting for the curtain to rise?

That was exactly what Rini felt. She whispered,

“Who are you?”

The woman faced Rini now. "I am a witch," she said, "And so are you?"

It was as if someone had suddenly shone a flashlight into Rini's eyes. She winced and stepped back.

"No!" cried Rini. "I can't be a witch."

"Why not?" asked the woman, a smile on her rosebud lips.

"Because... because I am not horrid! I am not bad."

"A witch is not horrid. When one has a strong will and can make things happen, people get frightened. They give her a bad name. The truth is that since they are themselves weak, they envy those who are stronger."

"How do you know I have a strong will?"

"Why don't you find out?"

The woman smiled and walked away. Rini stared at her till she disappeared round a bend.

An hour later, as she sat in the restaurant with her parents and their friends, every nerve in Rini's body taut, like stretched wire. She was intent on trying out her will power.

A waiter came to their table with soft drinks. Polly aunty made a face when the waiter handed her a glass "Not chilled, as usual," she whined, her nose twitching in disapproval. "No, I don't want ice cubes."

Rini looked at the tall glass in Polly aunty's hands. She concentrated hard and willed that the drink should freeze.

Polly Aunty, was twirling the drink in the glass as she talked. She didn't hear the tinkling sound. Soon, beads of water appeared on the outer surface of the glass. Polly aunty looked at the glass ruefully. "Just my luck" she sighed. "I told him not to put ice into my drink."

Rini kept staring fiercely at the drink. Her face took on a strange glow as, before her eyes, the juice froze solid. Several people were staring at the glass. But no one said a word. They turned away and resumed their talk as if nothing had happened. "The witch was right," thought Rini. "People are too afraid of strange things even to admit that they happen."

That evening, Rini made a yelping lapdog shut up and a bald man spill gravy on the table cloth.



Early next morning, Rini was at the spot where she had met the witch. The Mall was deserted. The ferns hung in clumps, the trees drooped with the weight of rainwater on their leaves.

“Come”, said the voice.

Without a word, Rini followed the woman. She seemed to glide gracefully along the road that spiralled downhill. Rini panted a little, trying to keep pace with her.

The bungalow they stepped into was one the like of which one kept seeing in films. Big glass windows, a sloping roof, cheerful wooden walls. Every room was a wonder—the stylish drawing room, the cosy reading room stacked with story books and soft toys, the pink and gold bathroom...

But the best of all was the bedroom to which the woman led Rini. Taking up an entire wall was a huge oak wardrobe. As the heavy door slid to one side, Rini caught her breath. These were the clothes she had dreamt of all her life—mini skirts, bermudas, white and silver gowns... And the shoes! The shoes-knee-high boots, pencil-heels, platform soles... Rini knew they would fit her. Everything in the house, and the house itself, was for her.

She turned to the woman and smiled. “Which is your room?” she asked. The woman looked away and said, “Now it’s yours”

“Why?”

“Only one person can stay here.”

“Why?”

But she left the room, leaving Rini alone. Rini sat down on the huge, round bed. The soft bed invited her to sleep, to forget everything. But hadn’t Rini discovered her will? She willed herself to find the answer to the questions; Why couldn’t more than one person live in the house? Why did the woman want to get away from all the riches?

The sun had climbed up higher in the sky melting the fog all around, when the answer came to Rini. One who willed all the good things in life for herself could have no space for anyone else. The woman wanted to get away because she could not enjoy the riches any more. She was tired of her dresses. Her shoes. Her soft beds and marble bathtubs. She wanted Rini to take her place. So she could get away.

Rini came out of the bedroom. There was hope in the eyes of the witch. And fear, too. Rini knew the witch was willing her to stay. Just as she had willed her to come to the road beside the Mall.

Their eyes were locked in silent combat. The dream house seemed to take in a deep breath and hold it.

“Your dreams are here,” the witch’s almond eyes seemed to tell Rini. “You only need to be brave to get what you want.”

“I want more,” Rini’s eyes replied. “I will not let my will make me a prisoner of good things. I can use my will to get things. I can also use it to give up things.”

Rini won. She walked to the door and opened it. She climbed up the long, winding way up to the Mall. There was a little tug at the back of her heart. “What if I have lost my magical will power? She thought.

“Let’s find out. I want coffee with ice cream for breakfast.”

“Where were you?” mother asked her as soon as she walked in. “We almost missed our breakfast.”

“Could we all have coffee with ice cream?”

“Tea and coffee are not for children,” mother said, a line she said often. Then her eyes met Rini’s.

Mother smiled and said, “Okay. But only for today.”



# The Inn of Double Happiness

Have you ever wished you did not exist? That you could vanish from the face of the earth without leaving even the smallest hole where you stood? That was how I felt last Monday. Ashamed. Guilty. Miserable. If only a giant eraser could rub me off completely, I thought, without leaving the slightest trace of the 12 years of my existence.

How could I forget the report cards? Why didn't I check the envelope a thousand times, or at least just once? I could still see the face of the Madam with large teeth and green-rimmed glasses when she pulled out of the envelope – the wrong one – those other pages and the Sir sitting next to her pressing his lips in a smile and, worst of all, the Headmaster of Bright Futures... Sorry. I didn't tell you what it was all about, did I? That's my problem. I am so forgetful!

Bright Futures is the best coaching centre in our city, the one which all students want to get into. Admission is tough, of course. You have to sit for a written exam, then pass an interview. All my friends took tuitions for months for the admission test.

Not I. My Mum coached me. And why not? Ravi, my elder brother, was coached by her and had sailed into BF. But there was another reason, too, one we never talked about. Mum did not have enough money to pay Ravi's fees for BF and my tuition. I am not a good student like Ravi, but I managed to pass the written exam. I think I did it more for Mum than for BF. I had stopped sketching the lizards and spiders for two full weeks before the test, which surprised even Mum. For I had started drawing all creatures that fly, creep or crawl even before I could hold a pencil properly, and I never stopped. I drew on walls, on Mum's typing sheets, on Ravi's school copies, on my own legs. Most people laughed at my drawings, others turned up their nose. Our drawing teacher at school, Mrs. Bedi, made me stand outside the class for an entire period because of my drawing. You see, she had asked us to draw a pet animal, and I had drawn a cockroach. I tried to explain that my cockroach lived with me, and ate from my plate and slept under my bed, and tickled me sometimes... But Mrs Bedi's face got

redder and redder till she looked like a tomato with teeth. “Hout!” she shouted, and I was out by the classroom door, my insides bubbling with laughter. Let those silly boys draw those endless huts and spiky coconut trees growing from hut roofs. Let them draw those suns with hair sticking out, and hills like rows of stiff sandwich.

Give me a lizard any day. You’d think it was a tame animal, but just as it caught sight of its prey, its eyes start sparkling and if you looked carefully, you could see its smile...

Mum never laughs at my smiling lizard pictures like Ravi. She never says “yuk!” like the girls in my class do. Mum looks at them carefully, then picks up the best ones and puts them in an envelope, and puts the envelope in a file. Mum works in an office, and she is very, very careful with all papers. Health checks, reports, bills, notices, everything go into her file. My sketches are in her file too, in a big white envelope, just like the important papers.

Last Monday, for my interview at Bright Futures, I picked up that envelope of sketches, instead of the one with my report cards. I didn’t stop to check once. Just like me. Instead of mark sheets, the Madam with green-rimmed specs pulled out the sketch of a lizard chasing another. Then all other Sirs and Madams started passing my sketches to one another and laughed at them. I knew then what I had done. The letter to Mum had said, “Mark sheets in original must be produced at the interview.” And all I produced were rats and roaches. I felt like shrinking into my boots and hiding in my smelly socks.

The Headmaster of BF looked at me over his spectacles and said, in an icy voice, “You must be aware that popular perception is not very favourably inclined towards arthropods.”

I started sweating. “Yes sir,” I said, not understanding a word.

“And you know that the digestive system of the cockroach is no longer in the syllabus?”

“Yes sir.”

“So why this anachronistic and anomalous exhibition of interest?”

I knew my mouth was open, but I couldn’t shut it.

Another Sir said, shaking with silent laughter, “Why do you draw spiders?”

“And roaches, my God!” the Madam was looking at my drawing as if it would climb over her. “Whenever I see one, I throw my slippers at it.” I



got mad then. "Do they ever throw the slippers back at you, Ma'm? I bet they don't. And what's more, they look much, much better than any of you do. Goodbye."

I walked out with my nose in the air. Only when I had reached the main road did I realise that I had left my bag behind. My best sketches were lost. And I had no money. I would have to walk home, which was two bus stops away. I walked down the street, my heart sinking with each step. What would Mum say? All her hard work on me gone to waste because of one stupid mistake. And my brother would surely tease me to death. "Remember to take your toes to school," Ravi often mocked me. "Don't forget your right elbow." Suddenly I found I just couldn't go on any more. I stopped and stood on the footpath. I saw millions of shoes hurrying past me. But I couldn't take another step. I closed my eyes. Oh, I was so tired, so tired.

I opened my eyes and saw a huge Chinaman.

"Come in, do come in sir," he said, giving me a fat-cheeked, yellow-teethed smile.

"The best meal for you, upstairs."

On my right, I saw a flight of dark, narrow steps leading up somewhere darker and narrower. I tried to dodge him, saying "I have no money." But he would not let me pass. "Not need money," he smiled even more.

"Today our restaurant's birthday. Free meal for the first customer."

I had never heard of such a thing, but suddenly I realised how hungry I was. Tense about the interview, I had skipped breakfast. The sudden thought of food sent my insides into a mad *bhangra* rap.

"Come, sir," the Chinaman bobbed and smiled, dimples rippling on his fat cheeks. I followed him up the narrow staircase squeezed between a book shop and a laundry. His huge back blocked my view, so that quite suddenly I found myself in a large room. As my eyes adjusted to the dim light, I could see round, redpainted tables, Chinese good luck charms hanging from red strings and rows of paper lanterns. I was firmly pushed into a chair. The room was cool and quiet. Oddly, it felt like coming home. From behind a counter painted with golden signs, an old woman smiled at me. I found myself smiling back. "May be the place is not running well," I thought. "So they are giving away free food to get more customers. Poor old people."

A big bowl of soup arrived. It was thick, full of chicken shreds, mushrooms and greens. I tried a spoonful... then didn't stop till I saw the





bottom of the bowl. Next arrived a dish of steaming noodles. Plates of mutton and prawn in various sauces landed around it. Light smoke curled up from them. I took up the fork. There is no way I can tell anything about that food. Just that I felt like a whole, strong human being again as I sipped the fragrant jasmine tea from a little, handle-less cup after the food was over. Then I spread out a paper napkin and took out the pen from my pocket. It took me three minutes to draw the most lively rat I had ever drawn. I walked to the counter, and handed it to the old lady. She was all excited. She called the old man in Chinese, and for a few minutes she chirruped like a bird. The man then turned to me, smiling all the more. "Thank you, thank you, sir. This year is Year of the Rat. Very, very lucky gift. We will put up picture on our wall."

The woman spoke again. The man said, "My wife say, do not forget this place, the Inn of Double Happiness."

Inn of Double happiness. What a lovely name!



“I will come again!” I said.

“We are always here.”

The misery was still there in my heart, but I felt I could deal with it now. When I reached home, I told everything to Mum right away. Imagine my shock when she started laughing. Ravi joined in the laughter, too, and suddenly I could also see the funny side of the whole business. But I had failed, and there was no getting around that. Like a stone, the sadness lay at the bottom of my heart. Life ran over it like water. Till Saturday, when a letter arrived from Bright Futures. I had got admission, after all! The headmaster had added a note, saying that he encouraged creative boys. The original mark sheets should be shown to the office staff before payment of fees. That evening, Mum gave us some money to spend – a rare thing for us. “I’ll treat you to a meal,” I said, and took Ravi to that street where I had found the Inn of Double Happiness.

But where was the Inn? There was the book shop, and the dry cleaners, but where was the narrow staircase in between?

“But it was here!” I kept saying. I knew Ravi would start teasing me about my memory in a minute. What he said took my breath away.

“Do you mean the Inn of Double Happiness?” he asked me softly.

I could only nod.

“I could not find it again either.”

Once, in a cricket match, Ravi had bowled so badly that the batsmen had taken 36 runs in two overs. Everyone had booed him, and he was sure to be dropped from the club team in the next season. That evening, he had found the Inn.

“And then?”

“I took two wickets in the first over next day,” grinned Ravi. “Then another three.”

“But why can’t we find the place?”

“I think,” said Ravi, “It is because we no longer need the Inn of Double Happiness. It is only for those who really need it.”

The streetlights were coming on as we walked away. We bought ice-creams and we licked the cones and talked about cricket as we walked down the street. But in my mind, I was wondering who would find the Inn of Double Happiness next. Would he see my drawing of a rat on the wall?

## A Home for Five Brothers

Last night, we escaped from *Varanavat*. My four elder brothers and I, sons of the great king Pandu, now lie under the open sky like poor pilgrims with Mother Kunti.

When I first heard we were going to *Varanavat*, I was glad. To tell you the truth, I never quite liked the palace at Hastinapur. It is much too big, too full—the ministers and royal officers, the queens and their *dasis*, our cousin Duryodhana, his ninety-nine brothers and their countless friends, palace guards at every corner—all throng the numerous rooms and courtrooms at the palace. We, the five Pandavas, were often lost in the crowd.

Or perhaps it was only I who felt lost. I can't imagine my brother Bhima feeling lost anywhere. Even in the largest crowd, he stands out like a mountain among hillocks. My third brother, Arjuna, is so brilliant, so clever that groups of people follow him wherever he goes. As for my eldest brother, Yudhishthira, his sweet, loving nature calms down even the naughtiest boys when they come before him. And brother Nakula is so handsome that everyone is willing to make friends with him. No, it was only I, Sahadeva, who even when among a palaceful of people, felt lonely. "This is not my home," I often thought. "Why can't Mother and the five of us go home?"

Once, when I was small, I asked my mother, "Ma, why can't the five of us go with you to our own home?"

Mother drew me close to her breast. "Now that your father is in heaven, my son, this is the only home I know," she said softly. "I have no other home." When I looked up, I saw tears in her eyes. I wanted to cry too, but I could not. One of the *dasis* would surely see me and start laughing.

"That son of Kunti," she would tell others, "what kind of prince will he make? Big enough to lift an iron bow, and still crying in his mother's lap." You see, in the palace, one is never alone. There's always someone, somewhere, who's watching you.

That is why I hated the long, narrow corridors which led up to our rooms. Only a few lamps were lit in those passages, which threw more



shadows than light. My cousins, Duryodhana's brothers, would often hide among these shadows, and suddenly leap on me. Two, three, four of them would pounce on me, punching me on my face, arms and belly. "Take that, and that, and that," they would hiss. "This is for the slap your brother Bhima gave me, this for holding us under the water, this for throwing us down from the *peepal* tree..."

When I reached my room, I would often be covered with bruises. My three brothers would be in another room, studying the *shastras* with other older boys. But brother Nakula would come to me at once. He would tear a piece of cloth, dip it in the oil of the lamp and press it on my cuts and bruises. "Don't tell anyone," he would warn me in low voice. "If brother Bhima gets to know of this, he will surely beat up more Kaurava brothers tomorrow. And you know that neither Mother nor brother Yudhisthira wants us to fight with the Kauravas."

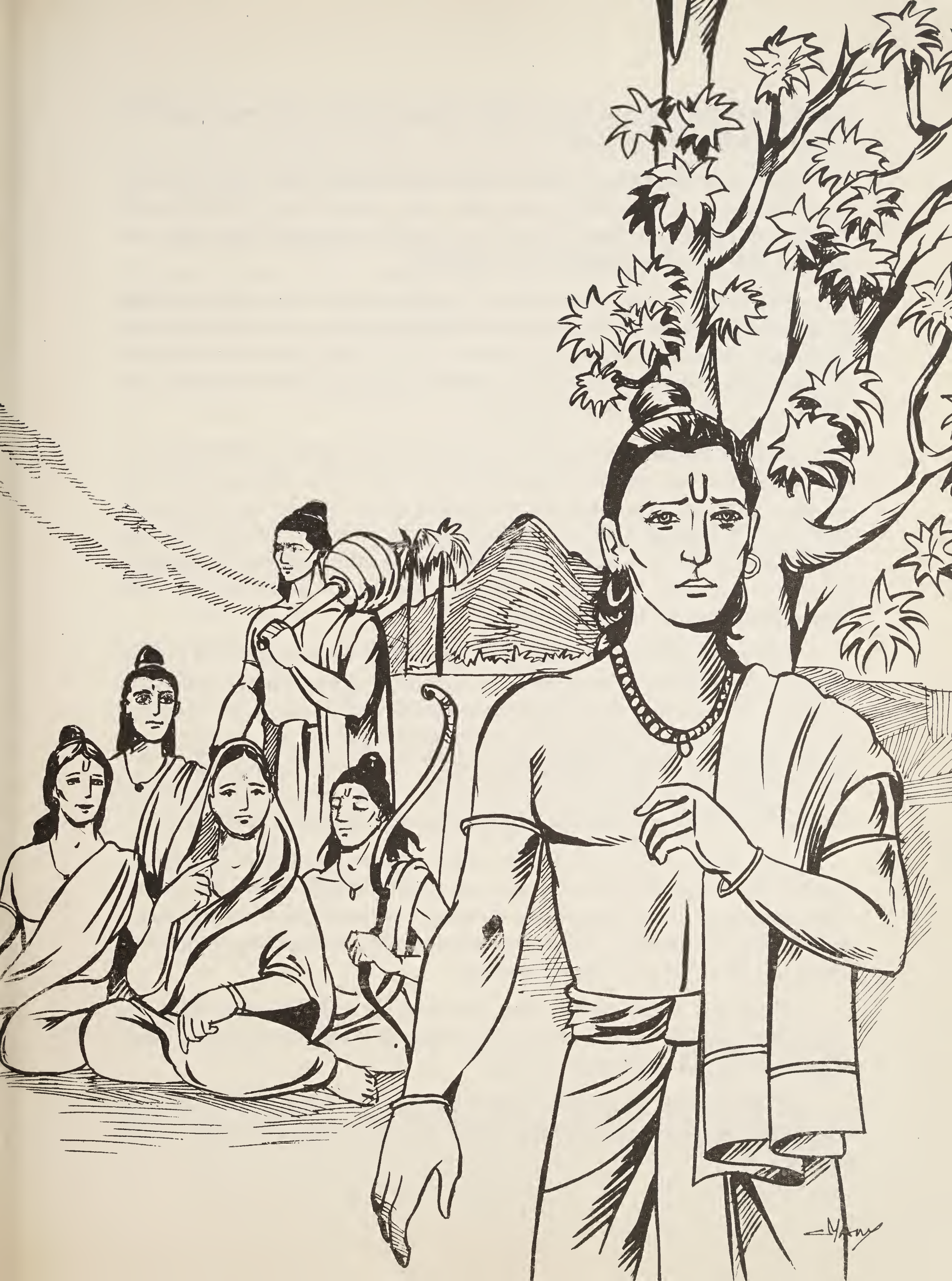
I never complained. Mother and my four brothers had to keep quiet even after Duryodhana had poisoned Bhima and pushed him into Ganga. How could I raise my voice? But I hated those long corridors of the Hastinapur palace. "This is not my home," I thought every time I stepped into them. "I don't want to stay here."

The sudden attacks on me stopped only after we started lessons under Guru Dronacharya. Kicks and punches were forgotten; we started learning the art of warfare in earnest. How well Arjuna learnt to use the bow, how powerful was Bhimsen with his mighty club. And we clearly beat the Kaurava brothers on the day of the Contest of Arms. Since then, the hundred Kaurava brothers never dared to attack the five of us, but their cold, hard stares followed us wherever we went. 'How can one live amidst so much hatred and jealousy'. I often wondered.

So I was delighted when our uncle, Dhritarashtra, asked the five of us to go to *Varanavat* for a few days. "We have a beautiful house made ready for you there," he said. "Go and have fun. Go hunting, wander by the riverside, enjoy the beauty of the place." My heart danced with joy. 'At least,' I thought, 'we would be together—Mother, my four brothers and I. Even if it is for a few days, we will have our own home.'

But that was not to be. The day we left, Uncle Vidura came a long way with us. His face was thoughtful, his eyes sad. He spoke to brother Yudhisthira in the language of the peasants; so clearly he was telling him







something secret. Yet I was not worried. When the five of us were together, what could possibly harm us?

Alas, even the bravest soldier cannot fight against fire. The home that I was dreaming of was nothing but a trap. Duryodhana wanted to burn us to death. The house so lovingly made for us was full of things which catch fire easily. Even the walls smelled of lac and fat.

My brothers were angry when they discovered the nasty trick that Duryodhana had played on us. Even Yudhisthira's lips were firmly set, his quiet eyes flashing like lightning before a storm. I was angry too, but there was something else in my heart, heavier than the anger. It was sadness. Are we never to have a home of our own?

Yet, for the few days that we stayed in the *jatugriha*, I felt happy as never before. There we were, five brothers, all ourselves. We sat close, we talked in lowered voices, we listened to each other. And for the first time in years, I had Mother with me all the time. She was not away in another room, surrounded by a hundred other women, a queen meeting the princes once or twice a day. She was our Mother, cooking for us, serving us food, eating and sleeping with us.

Have you seen how a small, dark cloud blots out the light of a radiant sun? So also the fear of being burnt to death, of being caught while digging a tunnel, of not being able to finish the tunnel in time cast a grim shadow on our joy of being together. We worked harder and harder, digging every night. With each blow of my shovel, I felt I was destroying my dream of a home. Perhaps that dream was the only one which I did not share with my brothers. Everything else-food, clothes and arms-we shared among us.

Last night, we set fire to the house ourselves and fled through the tunnel. We crossed the river by boat and entered a huge forest. We did not want anyone to know that we had escaped. "Let them think we are dead," said brother Yudhisthira. "Then Duryodhana will not send secret killers to chase us. We must go as far as possible."

But today I can hardly walk. The hot air and the ashes from the burning house, the tension of escaping, running through the night without food or water, all made me feel faint.

"Here we are, sons of the great king Pandu," I said bitterly, "fleeing into the forest. Not a roof over our heads. Homeless vagabonds, that is what we are."

Mother started crying when she heard me. Brother Yudhisthira scolded me with kind words. “No two days in a man’s life are the same, Sahadeva,” he said. “Should we not greet a day of sorrow just as we greet a day of joy?”

“Ha, ha”, laughed brother Bhima. “It is not your wise words that our Sahadeva needs, brother Yudhisthira. Leave him to me.” And he lifted Mother and me like two children and held us under his arms. By afternoon, Yudhisthira, Arjuna and Nakula were also too tired to walk, so Bhima took them all on his shoulders and ran on through the forest. He did not stop till the daylight faded. We had reached the side of a beautiful lake. Too tired to eat, we all lay down beneath the trees and slept.

I woke up a little while ago. It is now dark, a million stars are shining over my head. The still waters of the lake reflect their light.

But wait, what is that other light? It is the reddish glow of a fire. Who has lit a fire? Are there other people in this forest? Have Duryodhana’s spies found us already?

I look around carefully. Some distance from the fire, I see a dark shape leaning against the tree. A man. What is in his hands? A bow.

The man looks this way and by the light of the dancing flames I see it is Arjuna. He is guarding us all while we sleep.

I lie down again. Slowly my heart fills with a peace I have never felt before. What use are a roof, walls and pillars? Here we are, five of us, always together, always caring for each other, and for Mother. Wherever we go, wherever we spend the night, that place is our home.

I think I will sleep now.



# The Blessing

Catriona put the plate of lip-smacking bacon on the breakfast table and began working up her face to her bright look. I was her guest in the Balindrum farmhouse only for 19 hours, nine of them asleep with the cat graciously keeping me company in bed. But I had already got to know some of Catriona's looks.

There was the "Do-that-again-and-see-what-I-do-to-you" look, put on most often for Bob, a four-year-old with springs under his feet. There was the "how-many-times-must-I-tell-you" look, for nine-year-old Jo and 12-year-old Lana. And there was the "Will-you-stop-saying Mummy-for-a-minute" look, which was for all three children, dog, cat and hamster.

The bright look, however, was the most hated. Catriona always followed it up by merrily sung-out questions like, "Now who will take the potato peels to the compost heap?" "Who will take the dog out for a poo?" or "Who will clear up all the toys from the floor before Daddy gets home?" These cheerful words made the children's shoulders sag, mouth corners droop and drew a chorus of 'no-o-o.' So when I saw Catriona adjusting her eyebrows and shaping her lips into a smile, I thought I knew what was coming.

"Auntie Ruth is coming today for lunch. And Pam is coming too. Isn't that wonderful?" That wasn't what I was expecting. And to my further surprise, the children became angry.

"Why must Auntie Ruth come here every other Sunday? Why can't she - - -?"

"But you know what Pam did to my trampoline last time, Mum, and she kicked my hamster when..."

"Hampty Pampty, egg-shell tampty..."

"Enough!" Catriona almost shouted. This was quite unusual. Catriona was soft spoken, and especially in front of me. The family was making all efforts to show up the best face of "Scottish Culture," to a student to Scotland on a cultural exchange programme. Balindrum, a 150-year-old

farmhouse in Ross-shire, was about an hour's drive from Inverness. It was the perfect place to soak up life in the Scottish highlands. Lana had played Scottish tunes on the cello for me last evening. Jo had danced the highland dance and Bob sprung up and down on the same spot for six minutes in a very Scottish manner till his sisters chased him out of the room.

The light from the fireplace – a real coal and wood fire – had played on Catriona's wide-boned, smooth face as she sat watching her children, in that blessed gap between work and more work. Something like pride, something like happiness, had made her soft blue eyes softer, her face relaxed as she hummed the words along with Lana's tunes, her fingers rubbing the big dog which sat with his head on her lap. Now her face was taut, her eyes sharp and glittery.

"You know our house is one of the few places Ruth can visit," said Catriona. "And I want her to feel perfectly welcome here."

"But Mum, you know Pam..."

"Lana, It's only three hours."

"Only?" Jo danced even while sitting on her chair.

"Do you know the universe could be completely destroyed in three SECONDS, Mum? You know what Bandacan of Barracuda said to Masako the Samurai about this machine..."

"Jo, we are not talking about cartoons on TV..."

"It's not a cartoon, Mum, it's..."

"Or video games or whatever. And Bob, if I hear you once again using those words about Pam..." Bob took one look at his mother and slowly slid down the chair.

"Only the top of his tousled blonde head could be seen behind the plate of scrambled eggs.

"Now eat up your breakfast and then clean up the room.

Lana, you get those paper pigeons off the dining table..."

"Mum! They are origami dinosaurs!"

"... because we will need the table for lunch. We will have to take in the kitchen table, too, and put them together. And Jo, you clean out your hamster cage before lunch. That way there will be no chance of injury to your pet, okay?"



The breakfast table was so glum that the middle of poached eggs seemed a paler yellow, the pink blush on the fried bacons faded a little. Despite the marvellous spread of bread, bacon, ham, sausages, marmalade and coffee, a combination commonly offered in cafes and restaurants as the “Scottish breakfast,” the meal was a disaster. Catriona’s polite conversation was punctuated by the ‘thud’ of the cereal bowl, the ‘thunk’ of the jug of juice, the clank clank of spoons in glasses of chocolate. Noises angrier than words.

Catriona was telling me about the owner of the fields outside, a Mr. Hurren who made more by playing bagpipes than from growing barley, when the children started scraping their plates into the bin with such vehement screeching of forks on plates that there could be no doubt about their feelings. For a moment, Catriona looked a bit lost. “You mustn’t mind them,” she told me. “Pam has Down’s syndrome, and sometimes gets into a nasty temper. My friend Ruth can hardly visit anyone because there’s no one else at home to look after Pam. And Pam doesn’t, uh, quite adjust to all sorts of people, you know.”

I said I understood. But I had never spent time with anyone who had Down’s syndrome. I had no idea what to expect.

Some of the foreboding in the room was seeping into me, when Bob shouted, “That’s Dad, and Andy with him,” and all three children plus dog rushed to the door.

Peter walked in with burst of cold air, a spray of rain and a smell of wet, freshly-chopped wood. “Honey, where’s our electric saw, the one we plan to use to chop off old Mr. Hurren’s head? Don’t dance on my feet, Bob. Lana, give some tea to Andy, he’s freezing. You should see the Christmas tree we are getting at the club, kids, it’s 14 feet. How big do we want ours, Hon?”

Peter, like the good old wood-and-coal fireplace in Balindrum, radiated warmth on all sides. He had spent much of last night telling me stories about the ghost in the next farmhouse, originally an old man who made whiskey at home and hid the bottles in the barn to dodge the law. On some nights, his ghost was seen sneaking out of his house to go to the barn, and then drunkenly howl abuse to all liquor inspectors who objected to every Scotsman’s right to make his own bottle of Scotch. Even Balindrum, Peter assured me, was quite haunted. Lana and Jo used to talk to invisible people when they were little. I told him I still did that, but Peter insisted that his children saw a ghost. He thought it was a severed head with one eye and a front tooth missing, because Jo once drew such a picture.

“Come and get your tea, Andy,” Catriona was smiling again. Andy, a pale lanky teenager, shyly approached her table with Bob hanging from one arm and took his mug. Peter stomped about looking for the saw in all corners of the kitchen, in the loft, even in the dog’s sleeping basket. Lana and Jo finally discovered it in the boot of Peter’s car. Everyone had a good laugh over the men driving all the way home for the saw when it was in the car. Andy said he was glad he came, he needed the tea. Catriona said the tree for the house had to be nine feet, and Peter replied he had just ordered a tree to grow that high before he left the woods. The two men went out, the children begging to be taken along. Peter shook them off. “Come and see us later at the club doing up the tree!” he shouted as the car whirred its wheels and leaped away from the house. The children trooped back happily and were soon cleaning away breakfast things. The gloom had lifted.

Later, cleaning the cage of her hamster (like a large mouse, but without a tail), Jo told me why she hated Pam. Jo lifted the hamster from its cage, put it in a plastic ball that could be opened and closed, to start cleaning the wire cage. “Becky was in this ball, and Pam kicked the ball so-o hard, and Becky rolled and rolled. Poor dear, he was upside down for a week!”

“But Becky is always hanging upside down from the roof of the cage, Jo!” said Lana.

Jo sniffed. “Of course he is. And after Pam kicked him he just sat on the floor of the cage, so that’s upside down for HIM.”

Bob tittered, “He’s Beckham but he can’t roll a ball.”

“Shut up, Bob.”

“Shut up, Jo.”

“Jo,” said Lana, her cheeks dimpling and eyes mischievous, “Have you put away all your sketch pens?” And at once, inexplicably, the sisters fell around in a mad fit of giggles. They clutched their tummies and laughed till tears ran from the sides of their eyes.

Bob and I could only look at them and smile foolishly. Gaining her breath Lana whispered to me, “One time Pam stayed over, they found pen marks on the bed sheet.”

“So?”

“So Mom had to take her to the doctor.”



“To the doctor? For making pen marks?”

“You see,” giggled Lana, “Ruth thought Pam had put a pen up her bum!”

“Bum painting!” cackled Jo, and doubled up again.

A sharp word from Catriona, who was making a lentil pie, set the children picking up the Lego pieces. I joined Catriona to make a chicken curry, my side of the cultural exchange. When the car arrived, Catriona’s face put on the bright look again. We all went outside to greet Ruth and Pam.

Pam was large, almost larger than her mother. I was told she was a little older than Lana, but her body was spilling out of the jacket and the loose slacks she wore, and her head was completely bald. Ruth had a worn, thin face above bony shoulders and a rather creased neck.

“Welcome to Balindrum!” Catriona sung out. The children, very well-behaved now, said hello to Pam.

Ruth and Catriona embraced. Pam hung out her large, pink tongue.

Pam didn’t want to get into the house. She tugged Ruth and pointed to the car. When Ruth shook her hand off and walked to the house with Catriona, Pam simply sat down on the muddy drive. Lana and Bob pulled her hands and pleaded with her to come in. Pam’s large face was impassive, her small eyes fixed on the ground, as if she could see something underneath the earth.

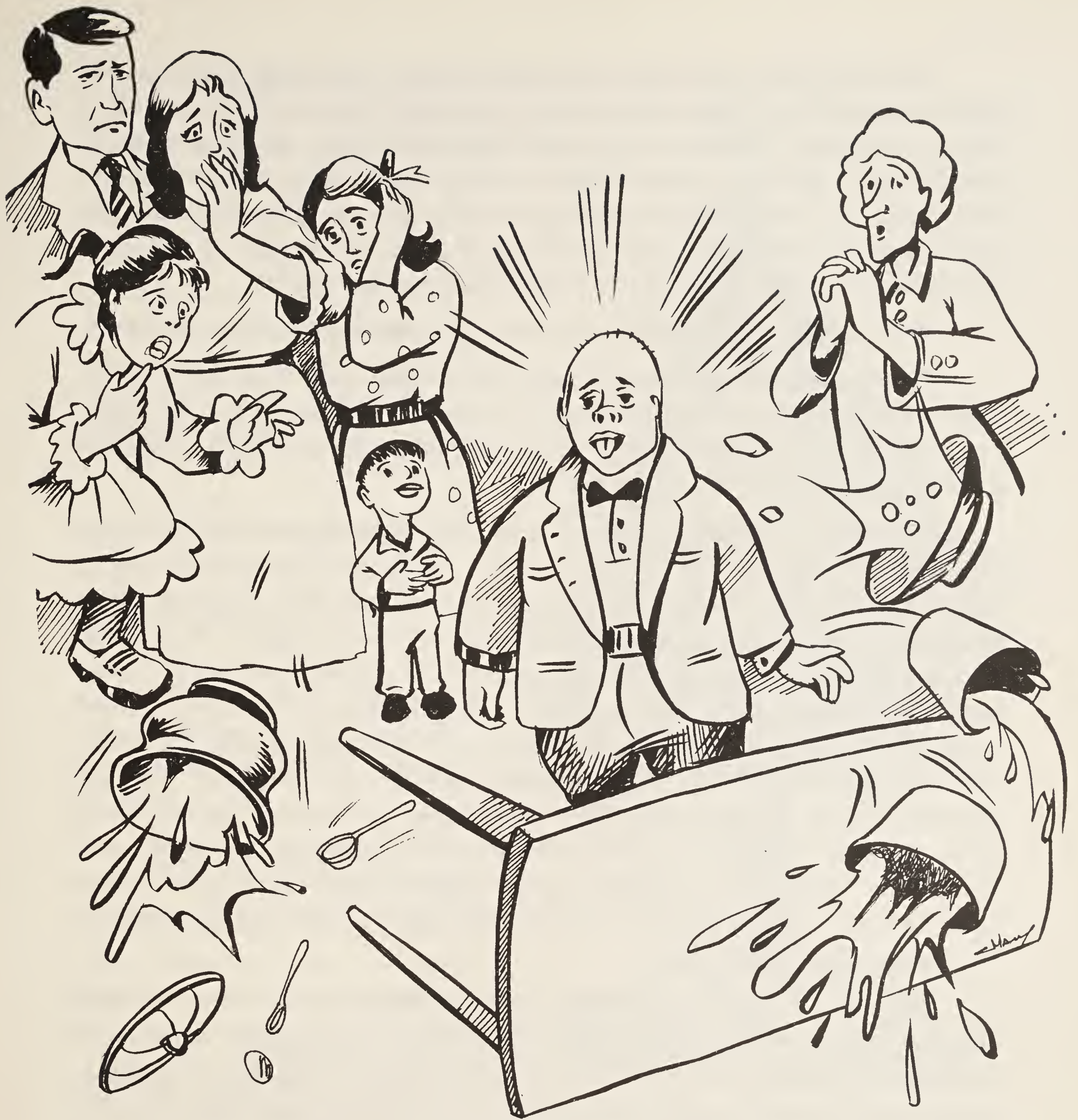
“Just come inside, the rest of you,” Ruth called out.

“She’ll come by herself.”

She did. We peeked out of the window to see her heaving herself up and ambling to the door. Catriona’s nose tip shook a little when Pam’s mucky backside made a large imprint on the pastel sofa. But she recovered quickly, and the children tried their best to engage Pam in some sort of exchange. “Seen this Barbie calendar, Pam?” “Want to try a Hazelnut chocklate, Pam?” “What are you doing for Christmas?” Pam hung out her tongue again. I began to understand that this was a habit with Pam. When Lana presented her one of the origami dinosaurs, Pam crunched it into a ball and flicked it to the floor. I realised then that she couldn’t speak.

Ruth brightly said, “Pam has painted some lovely Christmas decorations in her art class, haven’t you Pam?”





Bob eagerly pushed a pastel stick and a paper in her hands. "Paint us a star. Pam, go on."

Pam took the pastel, licked it, and threw it away. The paper floated down from her knee, unnoticed.

"Oh, she's not in the mood," smiled Ruth.

The children soon moved away, doing their own things.



Catriona, Ruth and I put the kitchen table and the dining table together and set out the lunch. Pam had an entire side of the kitchen table to herself. It was a lavish lunch, but the air was again tight with tension. Ruth sampled the chicken curry, gave me a broad smile and put a bit of curry in Pam's mouth. Pam spit it out. Ruth tried to make her eat the pie, the brussel sprouts, the roasted parsnips. She tried some garlic bread. Pam stared at her, at the plate, and at the cat curled up on the chair. She made no move to eat.

"She's having nothing but yoghurt these past few days," complained Ruth.

"She's dieting?" quipped Jo, and got a stern look from her mother. Catriona then took out a plastic pot of strawberry yoghurt from the fridge and put it in front of Pam. At last, Pam took up a spoon, dipped it into the pot and gulped the pink creamy liquid.

There was a collective sigh of relief. The children reached out for the food. Catriona picked a raspberry from the souffle, bit into it and smiled at Bob. I had just forked a bit of the excellent lentil pie into my mouth when Ruth said, "Now won't you have some fruits with your yoghurt, Pam?" and tipped a spoonful of berries into her yoghurt. In a flash Pam put her large hands under the kitchen table and gave a mighty heave. The table crashed to the floor, the plates of food went flying on all sides, hitting the walls, knocking over the lamp stand, dashing against the fireplace. The cat streaked out of the room shedding mayonnaise and lettuce leaves on all sides, the dog was barking madly and Bob was shrieking in surprise and fear. Gravy splattered the walls, brussel sprouts rolled to all corners and soup trickled on the carpet in a steady flow from a bowl rolling gently at the edge of the dining table.

Ruth was a deep shade of red, Catriona deadly pale. There was total silence in the room. Pam's little eyes rolled around, as if mildly surprised. It was Lana who broke the silence. "Mum," she said, her voice full of sunshine, "why don't we go for a ride in the big car? Pam loves a ride, doesn't she?" I looked at Lana and saw the same bright look, the upraised eyebrows and smiling lips, that showed so often on her mother's face. I saw it reflected from Lana's face back on Catriona's face, then on Jo's and on Bob's.

Ruth started saying, "Catriona, I can't say how sorry I am ..." when Bob screeched, "Jo! Your hamster is eating a tomato!"

We all turned around to see the hamster feasting on a tomato that flew to its cage and was stuck there. Suddenly, everyone was laughing. The mess on the floor was a joke, treading one's way through it was a game.



We bundled into the car and rode two miles to the seaside. The setting sun treated us to a spectacular show of colours in the grey, wintry sky. The sea was restless, sending up huge arcs of salty spray over the rocks. We looked at the ancient iron rings, where boats were tied. This was once a fishing village. The wives, Catriona told us, used to carry the husbands to the boats on their backs so that the men didn't have to wet their feet in the morning, and have wet feet all day.

I turned to Ruth then, and asked, "How do you carry the burden of Pam? How do you do it all alone?"

Ruth smiled at me. "Oh, she's a blessing, really. All children can be difficult. Pam is easy when you get to know her."

The "blessing" was walking down to us, flopping down on the beach every few minutes, and being coaxed to stand up again. The children, with infinite patience, using an infinite variety of tricks and treats, made her walk. By the time she reached us, it was time to walk back to the car. The whole process of walking Pam started again in reverse.

We dropped into the club on our way back. The Christmas tree stood tall and dark on one side of the over-lit hall. It still carried the shadows of the forest. Snowy-haired little ladies were taming it with tinsel and baubles. The bright lights twinkled in Pam's pupils. When Jo draped a length of tinsel around her neck, Pam let it be there. We drove back to Balindrum.





Ruth said she'd drive away directly, refusing offers of tea. Children waved goodbye and stroked Pam's hands. Pam stood quietly, till Ruth put a hand on her back to steer her towards her car.

Then Pam suddenly looked up, fixed her eyes on Catriona, shuffled up to her, and put her large, bald head on Catriona's shoulder. After a moment of stillness, Catriona raised her hand to stroke Pam's shoulder. Pam gently took it and put Catriona's palm to her mouth, holding it there.

We stood in silence. The stars came out and twinkled at us. The crickets buzzed their message from the bushes. The trees, giant black shapes by now, murmured in a low voice. A few fireflies darted around our heads, weaving trails of vanishing light.

The moment passed. Pam was bundled into Ruth's car, hurried good-byes exchanged, invitations to come again warmly advanced. The engine roared and the car bounced off. We walked in tiredly and started the work of cleaning up. The dog helped us liberally by licking up the mix of gravy and soup, curry and soufflé, from the floor and walls and chairs with his floppy pink tongue.

Later, while loading the dishwasher, Catriona told me that Ruth, a widow, had to leave her full-time job as an accountant to look after Pam. Now she worked part-time for a firm, which let her work from home.

"What bad luck," I said, "to have a child like Pam and be left to raise her alone."

"But Pam is not Ruth's own child, you know," Catriona said, pouring washing powder in the machine. "Ruth adopted her."

"Did – did she know...?"

"Yes, she knew that Pam had Down's syndrome, of course. Pam was two years old then."

Catriona went to put the tablecloths in the washing machine. I stared out of the kitchen windows to the dark fields outside. Peter had told me that if I were lucky, I might get to see the northern lights. They could be seen in Inverness in winter. I believed in my heart that on that night, if I looked at the horizon hard enough, I would see the northern lights.





A restaurant that appears only to very hungry boys, a witch who would give rubies and diamonds only if one could laugh, a flute which can make the grown-ups play like small children and the boy who painted the very first picture of mankind on the walls of a cave.

Each of the eight stories in this book tell a different tale, but they have one thing in common, a sense that great mysteries-strange powers, deep wisdom live within each of us. Sometimes we feel them in ourselves and at times in people we know. These stories are little prisms that set off the true colours hidden in the light of life.

The author of this book is a journalist. She writes stories for children in both English and Bengali.



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